

# Dictionaries and Woman's Place

Shigeko KUMAGAI

## I. Introduction

The meanings or connotations of words change in the course of time. Accordingly, dictionaries have to be revised, which is obvious to anyone. For example, if one is asked the meaning of the word "feminism" today, she or he will immediately think about women's rights. Very few people can give other meanings of "feminism." Interestingly, a comparison of the two editions in *Webster's Dictionary*, i. e. 1926 and 1961, reveals the change in the social background concerning the word.

(1) a . *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1926)

- ① feminine character or characteristics
- ② female characteristics present in males

b . *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1961)

- ① the presence of female characteristics in males
- ② the theory of the political, economical and social equality of the sexes
- ③ an organized activity on behalf of women's rights...

The former presented only definitions other than the main meaning nowadays. In other words, the definitions in 1926 were concerned with characteristics exclusively belonging to females, emphasizing femaleness, quite the opposite of the recent movements. From word-formational point of view, it

is natural that “feminism” means femaleness, by comparing it with the corresponding male term “masculinism,” which can be associated with maleness, i. e. strength etc. The change or addition of definitions in dictionaries shows that lexicographers have to be sensitive to social situations, people’s concern and so on. In other words, they have to write the definition of feminism in terms of advocacy of women’s rights even though it isn’t the original definition.

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the role of dictionaries, especially from a feminist point of view, by examining the purpose and the attitude of lexicographers in dictionaries of the English language, English-Japanese, Japanese-English and the Japanese language. Moreover, we would like to suggest that lexicographers should be more sensitive to a feminist point of view and make people aware of an asymmetry between men and women through linguistic expressions caused by derogatory connotation in words and phrases describing women. In this connection, let us cite a related idea from Lakoff (1990).

Those who have public power thereby have power to make language and make definitions---a power that, in turn, enhances and legitimizes their public power. Men have thus had the unquestioned power and authority to define male and female roles, to control language use, and to legitimize nonlinguistic behavior through that control of language. (Lakoff, 199)

Her point of view is closely related to the attitude of most lexicographers. Dictionaries nowadays have been offering rich definitions including subtle nuances or delicate shades of meanings, and labelling words as formal or informal, etc. Still, the definitions have not been exhaustive. Negative and derogatory connotations in words and phrases describing women in comparison with those describing men have not received attention.

Note that I do not support the idea that a simple labelling of words with derogatory/offensive connotation or a prohibition of the use of those words can change our attitude toward women or solve the discrimination against women. This hasty solution reminds me of the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, who criticized a totalitarian state including linguistic

control called "Newspeak." His idea is well-presented as follows.

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. (Orwell, 49)

As he pointed out, a simple prohibition or destruction of words may control our thought, good or evil, only to dehumanize us. Language and thought are closely connected with each other. Thus, we shouldn't solve the discrimination against women by controlling language. Rather, to destroy words in turn leads us to be indifferent to the realities including discrimination in the real world.

In sum, my purpose in this paper is to examine dictionaries from a feminist point of view and to point out that dictionaries should be revised to make people aware of and sensitive to an asymmetry in the description of men and women, i. e. discrimination against women. Hopefully, awareness will play an important role in liberation of both men and women. To put it differently, we would like to claim that even men, who put pressure on women in the name of discrimination, are not free from traditional stereotypical pressure. Men have to be strong enough to support women or children. The more pressure men put upon women, the more they suffer from the pressure onto themselves. It is both sides of a coin. Both men and women live on the same dimension. As language plays an important role in molding stereotypes, so do dictionaries.

## II. Change in the purpose of dictionaries

This section examines the purpose or attitude of lexicographers, beginning by referring to the drastic change of *Webster*. Let us cite the part of the preface from *Webster* (1926) and *Webster* (1961) to show the contrast in their purpose.

(2) a . *Webster* (1926)

A score or more of years after the speller was published, Webster took up the making of another book, intended for the aid of the self-taught man from his childhood to the end of his life...

b . *Webster* (1961)

...prescriptive and canonical definitions have not been taken over nor have recommendations been followed unless confirmed by independent investigation of usage borne by genuine citations.

...primary objective of precise, sharp defining has been met through development of a new dictionary style based upon a completely analytical one ... Accordingly, in addition to stated meanings in which words are in fact used, not to give editorial opinion on what their meanings should be.

As the prefaces show and some linguists have pointed out, the drastic change from *Webster* (1926) to *Webster* (1961) indicates that a prescriptive attitude is revised to a descriptive one, by minimizing or removing grammarians' opinions or criteria, and instead presenting the actual usage of those who speak English, educated or not. (Gerber, P. ed. (1984) *The Growth of English*. p. 78) In other words, any authority's criteria were removed from the dictionary.

The focus has shifted from learning language to presenting language as it is used. The change in focus or attitude is desirable, since biased authoritative control has been producing nothing but disaster, like "Newspeak" in Orwell's novel. In Japan, language authority once proclaimed that dialects, especially the northeast one, should not be used during language classes in order to standardize the Japanese language. This project has been successful. Because dialects and native speakers of dialects are considered vulgar, they feel ashamed of their own dialects, and stop using them in public. Nowadays, dialects are disappearing day by day, although language authority proclaims that dialects are beautiful and important because they reflect people's daily life, and therefore should coexist with standard Japanese. We

linguists should pay attention to the language people actually use and not distort it in the name of grammatical authority. Linguists should be aware that they can't control language to justify their authority.

Even the change in focus from prescriptive to descriptive has not removed subtle differences in the definitions from dictionaries. Let us take the word "nigger" as an example of discriminatory word.

(3) nigger

--- a negro -now usually contemptuous *Webster* (1926)

--- negro usu. taken to be offensive *Webster* (1961)

Both *Webster* (1926) and *Webster* (1961) give the negative connotation to the word "nigger", i. e. contemptuous or offensive. This kind of connotation should be presented in dictionaries, since words have these connotations when spoken or written. In short, the change in focus from prescriptive to descriptive freed language from biased authoritarian control, and came to reflect the realities people face through language. Other English dictionaries also show the negative connotation of the word "nigger", such as *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and *Cobuild English Learner's Dictionary* (1989).

Next, let us turn our eyes to English-Japanese dictionaries, which are intended for Japanese students learning English.

(4) nigger

---kuronbo (more offensive than "negro", but when used among black people, it implies intimacy.)

*Taishūkan's Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (1988)

Other English-Japanese dictionaries offer the offensive connotation as in (4). This shows that English-Japanese dictionaries basically follow English dictionaries. Then, what about Japanese dictionaries? It may be risky to translate English words into Japanese literally, but let me do so for the purpose of comparison. "Nigger" is translated into Japanese as "kuronbo." ("kuro" means black in Japanese)

(5) kuronbo

a . *Kōjien* (1991, Iwanami)

① refer to people with brown or dark skin mockingly or

intimately

② black people generally

b . *Shinmeikai Kokugojiten* (1989, Sanseido)

refer to black people living in the tropical region contemptuously

The dictionary in (5b) presents the negative connotation of the word, while the one in (5a) does not. Most of Japanese dictionaries are close to the type (5a), i. e. no mention of negative connotation. To me, the word “kuronbo” seems to have a negative connotation when referring to black people or even to people with brown skin. Why do Japanese dictionaries omit negative connotations, while English-Japanese ones include them? This is the point.

Here, in order to review the purpose of Japanese dictionaries, let us cite part of the preface from the dictionary (5b).

...Nevertheless, I have not been satisfied with any Japanese dictionaries. Our nation must be less advanced in dictionaries.

...examples are scanty, which means that definitions are far from rich. The primary objective of using dictionaries is to check how words are used. In other words, whether they are used with positive or negative meanings... (underline is mine)

Among Japanese dictionaries, the type (5b) is not common, since very few dictionaries offer negative (or derogatory) connotations in words. The underlined part must be emphasized for lexicographers. When we use dictionaries, we expect them to give us useful information not only of denotative but also of connotative meanings, which makes us aware of the usage in the real world. In sum, English, or English-Japanese dictionaries are more advanced in offering subtle connotations than Japanese dictionaries. Inclusion of subtle meanings should be taken into consideration for their revision. *Gendai Kokugo Reikai Jiten* (1988, Shōgakukan) claims that “dictionaries should be a lively place, but not a graveyard for language,” --a helpful suggestion.

### III. Connotation in words and phrases describing women

Now, we understand that the contemptuous connotation of the word “nigger” is offered in English or English-Japanese dictionaries, though not in Japanese dictionaries. Next, let us consider words and phrases describing women contemptuously, “old maid” for example.

(6) Old maid

a . *Webster* (1926)

a woman, somewhat advanced in years, who has never been married ; an elderly spinster.

b . *Webster* (1961)

a spinster

a prim nervous person of either sex who frets over inconsequential details

c . *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989)

a woman who remains single considerably beyond the ordinary marrying age ; an elderly spinster : usually connoting habits or characteristics of such a condition

d . *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1990)

(derog) an elderly unmarried woman. a prim and fussy person

e . *Cobuild English Learner's Dictionary* (1989)

People sometimes refer to an old or middle-aged woman as an old maid when she has never been married and they think that she will never get married ; an offensive expression

The definitions in (6) reveal that only two out of five dictionaries give a negative connotation of the phrase, i. e. derogatory in (d) and offensive in (e). When the word “nigger” is defined, most of the dictionaries give a negative connotation. On the contrary, in the case of the phrase “old maid”, fewer dictionaries offer a negative connotation. In this connection, let us quote from Lakoff (1990).

Since the 1960s, whenever blacks have suggested changes in the way they were to be spoken of or addressed, society as a whole,

including the media, has speedily followed suit. Even the biggest southern redneck has learned to avoid clever pronunciations of “nigger” in public, or risk ostracism ; no one calls black men “boys” any more...

Women have not been as successful. It is still considered fair to make fun of the movement’s requests, or ignore them completely...

(Lakoff, 212)

Even dictionaries reflect that people are more sensitive to the blacks’ rights than to women’s rights. In America, blacks (but just free black men) got the right to vote in 1870, while women got it in 1920. Discrimination against women has been neglected for a long time, far behind other equal rights movements. Since lexicographers in dictionaries have consisted and still consist mostly of men, women’s point of view has not been taken into consideration.

This point is also more applicable to Japanese dictionaries. As mentioned above, Japanese dictionaries, which are conservative at least from a feminist point of view, are far behind English ones in their biased definitions. In addition to “kuronbo” (nigger), the word “dekunobo” (a stupid person, a dunce in English) is defined in most Japanese dictionaries to “refer to people who are clumsy with a derogatory connotation.” The connotation indicates that lexicographers of Japanese dictionaries notice that there are some words and phrases with derogatory connotations in Japanese. However, the following definitions show that they have not been aware of their derogatory connotation when it is a matter of describing women.

(7) a . ōrudo misu (=old maid in English)

an unmarried woman past the marriageable age

b . urenokori (=remain unsold on the shelf)

a woman who remains single even after the marriageable age

Most Japanese dictionaries present similar definitions to (7), not mentioning a negative connotation. The phrases in (7) sound very offensive and disgusting. “Ōrudo misu” implies there is a fixed marriageable age. The phrase “urenokori” reflects the metaphor that women are goods for sale. It is evident that they are used only when women are described offensively or



derogatively. They are not used on formal or polite occasions. My point here is that dictionaries have never considered words and phrases describing women from a feminist point of view.

Interestingly enough, *Nichiei Jiten* (1992, Kenkyūsha), a Japanese-English dictionary for non-Japanese people learning Japanese, gives a derogatory connotation to the word “onna” (woman in English).

(8) a . onna : woman, female, often has a derogatory connotation, 'josee' is preferable.

b . otoko : man, male, has no derogatory connotation like onna .

The dictionary presents a derogatory connotation including an asymmetric difference in connotation between men and women. I think that this kind of awareness is helpful even to Japanese native speakers. However, most of the Japanese dictionaries do not illuminate such an asymmetric difference, as in the following dictionary for junior high school students.

(9) onna : of the sex which can produce offspring, the meaning is wider in use than 'josee' or 'joshi'

① woman

② woman who is beautiful and kind etc.

③ helpless woman

④ woman with a charming look

...

*Reikai Shin Kokugo Jiten* (1994, Sanseido)

The definitions in (9) suggest that there is no derogatory connotation in the word “onna.” In this sense, the Japanese-English dictionary is more advanced than Japanese dictionaries. In other words, the former is more sensitive to social situations than the latter. The asymmetric differences in connotation given in dictionaries will make us aware of the women's status in the society and understand the inequity in women's conditions. One of the important roles played by dictionaries is to raise awareness through definitions of words and phrases.

#### IV. Asymmetry in the description of men and women

As mentioned before, the words and phrases describing women often connote derogatory or discriminatory nuances. Women are treated as goods and secondary objects compared with men. To put it differently, the words and phrases describing women and men asymmetrically reinforce the roles of traditional stereotype put on men and women. By revealing the asymmetrical meanings and connotations concerning men and women, we can realize the unequal relation between men and women, which causes tension between men and women.

Let us give a pair of phrases, i. e. old man vs. old woman, to show an asymmetry.

- (10) old man : husband, father, recognized authority  
old woman : wife, mother, a man of timid and fussy character  
(*Webster, Oxford English Dictionary*, etc.)
- (11) *Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus* (1976)  
old man : syn. husband, hubby, lord, man  
syn. father, dad, governor  
old woman : syn. wife, ball and chain, lady, little woman, old  
lady, squaw  
syn. mother, mama

The definitions given in English dictionaries mentioned so far tell us that "old man" has a positive connotation, while the corresponding female term "old woman" has a negative connotation, even including the meaning covering the opposite sex, i. e. fussy man. The definition implies that men are respected even after they get old, but women are despised, young or old.

From a feminist point of view, there are some books which point out words and phrases describing women or reinforcing female stereotypes.

- ① Maggio, R. (1987) *The Nonsexist Word Finder : A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage*. The Oryx Press.
- ② Miller, C and K. Swift. (1980) *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing : For Writers, Editors and Speakers*. Harper Perennial.

③ Mills, J. (1989) *Woman Words : A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society*. Longman.

④ *Kokugo Jisho ni Miru Josee Sabetu* (1985) (Sexism in Japanese dictionaries) Sanichi shobō

The books (①-③) deal with English language, and (④), Japanese language. (④) discusses the discrimination against women through the definitions in dictionaries and proposes alternative principles for presenting definitions. Let us introduce the part of the book (①) and (②) by giving two examples, i. e. girl and working woman, and examine their Japanese versions in order to find a hint as to asymmetric connotation for further research.

Firstly, let us take the word “girl.” Their solution is as follows.

① girl : → woman, young woman

② I'll have my girl run off some copies right away.

→ secretary, assistant, Ms. Blake (name)

→ : alternative

In Japanese, the corresponding term for girl is “onnanoko” (onna means woman, and ko means child). Male bosses or workers in Japanese companies often call female workers as “onnanoko.” The expression connotes or reveals that female workers are less capable than male ones, or they are not expected to work harder than men. The covert presupposition underlining the expression is that women are considered to work temporarily and less professionally. No wonder that the corresponding male term “otokonoko” is rarely used in workplace, even mockingly.

Secondly, let us give an example of “working woman/wife/mother.”

① working woman : → worker, wage-earning/salaried woman (the expression “working mother” connotes that mothers staying at home are thought little of.)

② working wives offer their husbands the flexibility to do what they want with their lives. → wives who brings home a pay-check (even in these days, where women work in many places, women are defined on the basis of housework and, accordingly, that women work outside is emphasized too much.)

The same thing applies to Japanese. The underlying assumption implied in “working woman” is that the woman’s role is basically at home and the man’s role, outside the home. The Japanese proverb goes “men should not talk about inside matters and women should not talk about outside matters.” It follows from this assumption that the combination of “working” and “mother” is informative, while that of “working” and “father” is not.

(12) a . Watashi no haha wa shigoto o shiteimasu.

my mother work do

lit. My mother works/is working.

b . Watashi no chichi wa shigoto o shiteimasu.

father

lit. My father works/is working.

Linguistically, both (a) and (b) have the same meaning, that is, my mother/father is working or has a full-time job. However, pragmatically, there is a subtle difference between the sentences. The sentences (12) reveal the asymmetrical difference. In the case of mother, it strongly means that she has a full-time job. In the case of father, it tends to mean that he is working right now, since it is taken for granted that fathers have full-time jobs. Thus, both English and Japanese languages have the asymmetrical meaning.

Moreover, let us point out another example of an asymmetrical connotation in Japanese, which originates from stereotypical bias.

(13) a . Anata no okusan wa rikai ga arimasune.

your wife understanding

lit. Your wife is understanding, isn’t she ?

b . Anata no goshujin wa rikai ga arimasune.

husband

lit. Your husband is understanding, isn’t he ?

When the sentences (13) are uttered with respect to a stereotyping role, normally the sentence (a) implies that your husband quits a full-time job and think about starting his own company. On the other hand, the sentence (b) implies that your wife gets a full-time job or enters college etc. Linguistically, both of the sentences mean the same thing, i. e. the person in question is understanding. However, a pragmatic connotation is opposite, i. e. quit or

get a full-time job. Again, there is a stereotypical presupposition for the interpretation of the sentences. The expression “understanding” means that in the case of wife, she has to support family if her husband’s company is not going well and, in the case of husband, he has to help his wife with housework since she cannot devote herself to it. The pragmatic aspect reveals the traditional stereotyping of men and women in Japan. The concept of asymmetrical connotations will be helpful information in dictionaries.

## V. Conclusion

In 1867, in England, John Stuart Mill proposed to amend the law concerning suffrage, changing the word “man” for “person” to advocate women’s right to vote. At that time, the proposal was rejected. However, his proposal made people aware of women’s right to vote and gained support. In this paper, I claimed that dictionaries play an important role in making people aware of discrimination in society and the asymmetry between men and women. By so doing, they serve to liberate men and women from the pressure of traditional stereotyping.

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